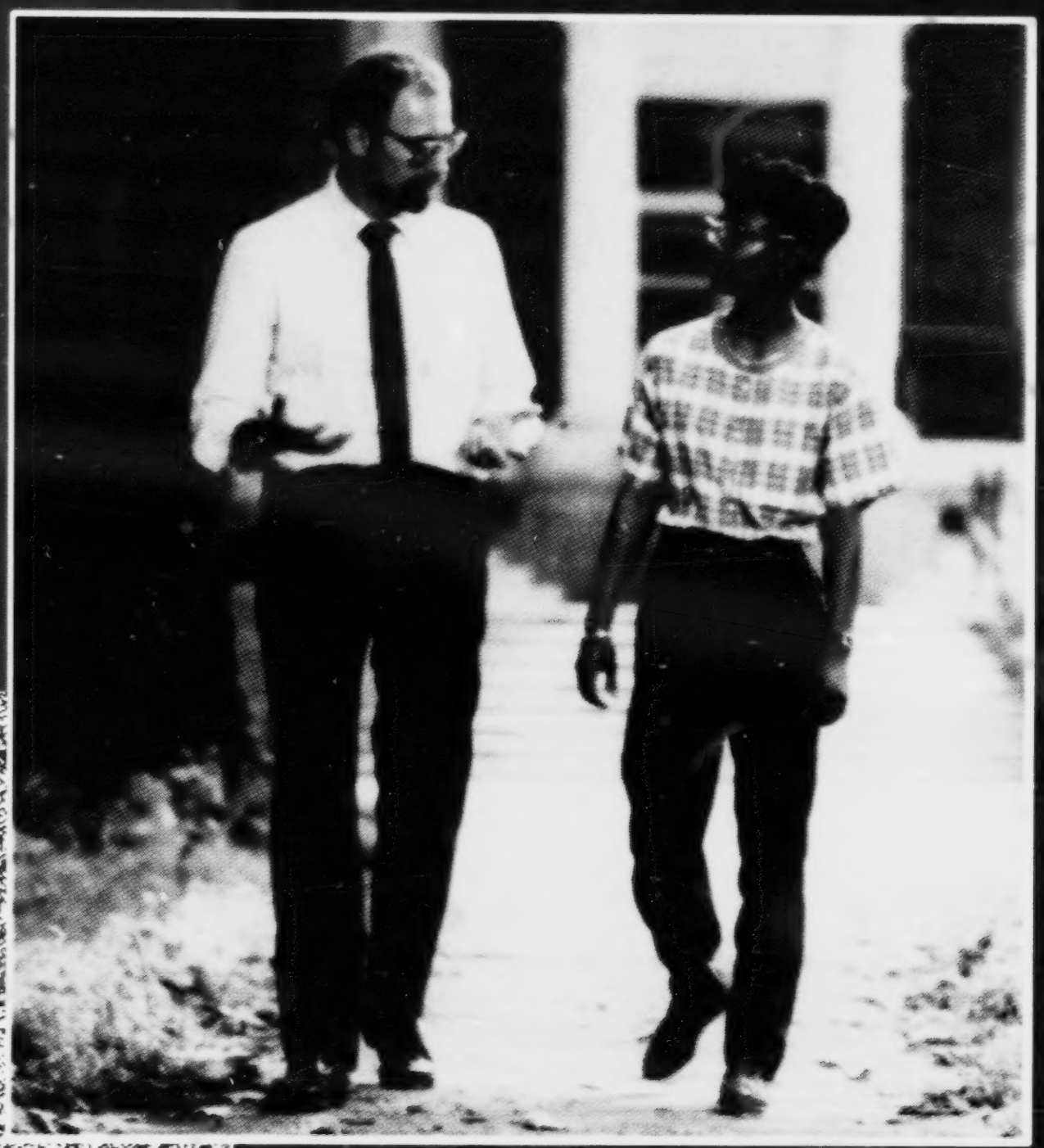
141-84

Department of Veterans Affairs

The Caring Approach to Mental and Emotional Disorders



Veterans Health Services and Research Administration

VA 1.22:

best copy available

This booklet is intended to be used for the orientation of new non–mental health staff and volunteers at medical centers, outpatient clinics and domiciliaries.

Prepared by:
Mental health and Behavioral Sciences Service (141A6)
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20420

Veterans come to our medical centers for many reasons. Some come because they are physically ill, in pain, or disabled. Some come because they are depressed, worried, or show disturbed behavior. It is estimated that up to one person in ten suffers from mental or emotional disorders serious enough to require professional attention.

Simple emotional disturbances are a part of everyday life, and these reactions to the stresses of day–to–day living are perfectly normal. If the disturbance cannot be resolved or if it intensifies, it can be an indication of mental or emotional illness. The treatment of mental and emotional disturbances is similar to the treatment of physical illness because, in both, patients can benefit from diagnosis and treatment.

A good place to start in your relations with psychiatric patients is to realize that they would probably appreciate being treated the same way that you wish to be treated. If you assume that they have similar needs to your own, then you will be on the right track.

They appreciate being treated like ordinary human beings, which they are.

*T*ry to be natural with patients. Some people feel that they should treat psychiatric patients with exaggerated kindness or concern. Psychiatric patients do not want to be treated like a special category of people. They appreciate being treated like ordinary human beings, which they are. So a natural approach will make patients more comfortable.

Showing people your concern and respect can help them rebuild their self=esteem... a positive approach is still the most helpful attitude to take.

Psychiatric patients can benefit from kindness, friendliness, and respect. When a person is ill, their self–esteem is usually low. Showing people your concern and respect can help them rebuild their self–esteem. While most patients will be responsive to this approach, some patients may show indifference or even hostility to your best efforts. Even if this is the case, a positive approach is still the most helpful attitude to take.

Try to be a good listener if the patient wants to talk with you. This does not mean giving the patient advice on how to deal with life or talking about your own problems. It means trying to understand the feelings of the patient and communicating your understanding of what the patient is trying to say.

...show more tolerance or understanding...

It is best to be clear–cut and simple with psychiatric patients. Many of these patients have trouble thinking clearly and are confused, so communication with them is difficult. It is part of their illness. So if you have information to give or a request to make, clear, straightforward communication is most helpful. Also, orient patients. State your name and position to help them.

Don't feel that you have to make everything right in the patient's life. Many psychiatric patients have chronic disorders that cannot be completely cured. Even if the problem is not chronic, there are usually no simple solutions. So try to value spending time and communicating well with patients. There are great rewards in this approach.

While many psychiatric patients are indistinguishable from people without emotional problems, some do show abnormal or bizarre behavior. It helps to show more tolerance or understanding than you would in normal circumstances. Even if the patient's behavior seems extreme to you, you should consider not reacting excessively to the patient. To some extent psychiatric patients require a different set of star.Jards than people in everyday life.

...consider the appropriateness of your own behavior. You do not want to complicate the treatment...

However, you should consider bringing in–appropriate or potentially harmful behavior to the attention of the treatment team. Lay people are not expected to handle this kind of behavior. But the treatment team needs to be informed so they can begin to help the patient.

Take any threats seriously, and report them to the treatment team. It takes a professional to determine what kind of response is necessary if patients have threatened to hurt themselves or somebody else.

It is important to consider the appropriateness of your own behavior. You do not want to complicate the treatment of patients. Because of this, do not have an outside relationship with patients. Don't lend money to patients. Don't accept gifts from patients. Keep your relationship on a professional level.

...keep in touch with the treatment team. They can help you understand the patient better...

Some psychiatric patients might complain about the staff. As a result, you might feel impelled to serve the patient's advocate, but it is best not to take sides. Once again, you should keep in touch with the treatment team. They can help you understand the patient better and help you react in a helpful way.

No matter what your work, you are a member of a team. This team is doing the best to give every veteran who comes to your medical center the best possible chance to get well. What you do or say to a patient can make a contribution to this team effort.

Veterans Health Services and Research Administration
Washington, DC 20420
660/9–89/2,000

IB 141–84
June 1990